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ABSTRACT

Some research suggests the existence of differences in characteristics between older adults who are continuing to earn money through employment and those who have retired from gainful employment. Data on a national random sample of men and women (N=1000) between 68 and 73 years of age were examined to contrast the characteristics of employed and unemployed older adults. Subjects were interviewed about their education, marital history, employment history, and quality of life. Comparisons were made between the employed and retired groups in terms of 15 quality of life factors. Major differences were found between employed and unemployed older adults on such factors as education, type of work, present health, and marital status. The data indicate that overall quality of life for 70-year-old workers is similar to that of 70-year-old adults who are not working. (Author/RC)

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SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF 70-YEAR-OLD WORKERS

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Some Characteristics of 70-Year-Old Workers

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The national sample that provided the data being reported here was selected as a stratified random sample of all persons in the United States who had reached their 68th birthday but not their 73rd birthday. For convenience they will be referred to as 70-year-olds. Each of the 500 men and 500 women included in this sample participated in an extensive four to five hour structured interview including among other things, their education, family history, and employment record.

Each individual reported on his or her current overall quality of life and the extent to which their needs and wants were met with respect to the 15 components identified in a previous study as the factors determining a person's quality of life. They also indicated whether or not they were currently employed and, if working, they reported the importance to them of each of the 18 listed aspects of jobs in general and the extent to which their present job had these characteristics.

The first question to be answered is how many of these 70-year-olds were working and what they were doing. Only four percent of the men in this sample were working full-time and 12 percent were working part-time. For the women it was also found that four percent were working full-time. The number of part-time workers, however, was only eight percent for the women.

Most of the men were in jobs not requiring professional training. About 41 percent were in general labor and service type jobs requiring no special skills. Nearly 14 percent more were in mechanical, technical, or construction trades. Thirty-three percent were in sales and clerical positions, and only about 12 percent were in jobs requiring college training, principally business administration, teaching, and fine arts.

Many more of the women, about 29 percent, were in jobs requiring college training. These again included teachers as the largest sub-group, but also included persons in all of the main professional groups except mathematics, physical sciences, and engineering. The unskilled labor jobs included a fairly large group, of about 31 percent. However, for the

women the largest group was sales and clerical and included 39 percent of those working either part-time or full-time. The types of jobs were similar for those employed part-time and full-time.

A factor which has been found to be a very important one at all age levels but which plays a larger role among the elderly is health. In the total group of 70-year-old men 27 percent describe their health as either "fair" or "poor." Among those working full-time only five percent describe their health as "fair" or "poor." However, poor health is not as strong a deterrent to part-time work. Nearly 25 percent of the men working part-time describe their health a "fair" or "poor."

The women in the total sample of 70-year-olds described their health in terms very similar to those for the men. In the total group of 70-year-old women 28 percent describe their health as either "fair" or "poor." However, possibly because of the different nature of their jobs the differences in health ratings found for full-time employed men were not found for the comparable group of women. There were 26 percent of the full-time women workers and 23 percent of the part-time women workers who described their health as "fair" or "poor."

The total group of 70-year-old men and women who were working either full-time or part-time were asked to report what they saw "as the important aspects of a job." They were asked to indicate on a list of job characteristics how they felt about 18 aspects of a job. The question asked them to report "whether it is 'very important,' 'important,' 'moderately important,' 'only slightly important,' or 'not at all important' to you that a job have this."

The seven of the 18 job characteristics reported to be "important" or "very important" by at least 80 percent of these employed 70-year-olds are listed in the order of their reported importance. Nearly all of these workers reported "work that I feel I do well" was important to them. Other characteristics rated as important included:

2. Work that I feel is important or worthwhile.
3. Friendly, likable co-workers.
4. Work in pleasant surroundings.
5. Interesting work.
6. Work that is challenging and permits me to use my abilities fully.
7. A supervisor who is pleasant and interested in my welfare.

The next group contained eight job characteristics that were reported as important to them by two-thirds to three-fourths of these 70-year-old

workers. These included in order of their indicated importance:

1. Freedom to make my own decisions.
2. Work in the area in which I specialized or prepared.
3. Flexible hours.
4. Having clearly defined responsibilities.
5. A supervisor who is competent at his or her job.
6. Job security and permanence.
7. A job free from pressures and deadlines.
8. Good income now or within a few years.

The three remaining job characteristics were reported to be important by only 30 or 40 percent of these older workers. They included:

1. A job that gives me status and makes people look up to me.
2. Long vacations.
3. Opportunity for promotion and advancement.

To conclude this brief look at the characteristics of 70-year-old workers, their reports of their overall quality of life will be examined and compared with the reports of both those not employed in their age group and the similar reports of 50-year-olds.

Employed 70-year-old men and those not employed both report that their overall quality of life is quite good. In both groups 52 percent report that their overall quality of life is either "excellent" or "very good." Nineteen percent of those not employed and 16 percent of those employed report that their overall quality of life is only "fair" or "poor." The women's reports are quite similar. More of the working 70-year-old women report that their overall quality of life is "excellent" or "very good"---61 percent as compared with 49 percent for those not in paid jobs. However, this difference is due entirely to a few more of the employed women as compared with those not working reporting their overall quality of life as "very good." There is actually a slightly smaller proportion of the employed 70-year-old women as compared with the proportion of those not in paid jobs, who report their overall quality of life as "excellent." At the other end of the scale the percentages are very similar, with 18 percent of the employed women as compared with 17 percent of those not in paid employment reporting their overall quality of life as only "fair" or "poor."

The comparisons with 50-year-olds show that in the large group that includes the 84 percent of the men who are working, 69 percent report an "excellent" or "very good" overall quality of life. Only 8 percent of the men employed in this age group report their quality of life as "fair" or "poor." The 50-year-old men who are not working generally report a less favorable overall quality of life. Only 31 percent report it to be "excellent" or "very good" and 36 percent report it to be "fair" or "poor." Thus the 70-year-old male workers do not report quite as good an overall quality of life as do 50-year-old workers but the 70-year-olds not working report a significantly better quality of life than the comparable 50-year-old males.

The 50-year-old women who are working also report a slightly better overall quality of life than the 70-year-old group that is working with 65 percent reporting an "excellent" or "very good" quality of life and only seven percent reporting an overall quality of life that is "fair" or "poor." The 50-year-old women who are not working report an overall quality of life very similar to that of the 70-year-old women who are not in paid employment. Forty-eight percent of the 50-year-olds as compared with 49 percent of the 70-year-old women in these groups report their overall quality of life as "excellent" or "very good." Similarly, 21 percent of the 50-year-old women as compared with 17 percent of the 70-year-old women who are not in paid employment report their overall quality of life as "fair" or "poor." There are 53 percent of the 50-year-old women in paid employment as compared with only 12 percent of the 70-year-old women.

Thus it appears that this sample of 70-year-old workers report their overall quality of life to be very much the same as that of their 70-year-old peers who are not working. It does not appear that working or not working has a major effect on the quality of life of 70-year-olds in general. Certainly this can be expected to vary for individuals but these findings suggest that many of the elderly could make valuable social contributions with no loss in their overall quality of life.